9 Of 10 Critical Navy Needs Not Met

By Jack Anderson

The Navy's vaunted destroyers are in danger of becoming a ramshackle collection of tin cans with blind radar, broken missile systems, wheezing pumps and rotting hulls.

This is the ominous warning in classified messages from the admirals of the Atlantic and Pacific cruiser-destroyer forces to the Navy Material Command in Washington.

The glaring problems were first outlined 17 months ago in a three-page teletype message stamped "PRIORITY . . . CONFIDENTIAL." It reads more like the inventory of a junk pile than an analysis of the Navy's sleek terriers of the sea.

"This message is to focus attention on the ten material deficiencies considered most serious (and) to urgently solicit . . . corrective action," the worried admirals reported.

Most urgent, they warned, was the condition of the intricate air search radar equipment which is supposed to alert the fleet to any surprise attack. Its "reliability (is) poor, parts support poor, maintenance man-hours and cost high," the cable lamented.

The Navy's famous ASROC antisubmarine rocket could not be launched on some ships in case of a sub attack because the "loader cranes are categorically unreliable." The fleet admirals added that "redesign and/or shipalts (alterations) has not provided any significant improvement . . . An immediate 'get well' program is needed if this equip. is to be used at all."

The hulls of the handsome warships have also suffered "structural failures" in part because the "aluminum structure deteriorates due to electrolysis." The admirals called for urgent help "to alleviate this serious deficiency."

Black Paint

The seadogs also complained that some dimwit had ordered vital repair parts "dipped in black paint (which) makes spares almost unidentifiable." Other parts are "virtually nonexistent," technical manuals are "inadequate" and parts replacement delays are so rampant that one failing part sometimes masks another.

Poor design and missing parts have also fouled gun mounts, air compressors, transceivers, electronic intelligence monitors, air blowers and even course plotting boards.

On some items, the "situation is beyond the repair technicians' control," the fleet admirals complained. They "recommend complete review" of these items by the Navy Secretary himself.

After this stunning complaint, the Navy began a crash program for repairs. We have studied hundreds of pages of the followup documents, many of them classified, on what progress has been made.

Sad to relate, the most recent one, dated Feb. 25, 1972, lists nine of the ten most critical conditions still in need of drastic corrections.

Footnote: Although the Navy has spent billions on such whacky schemes as a robot helicopter—which was supposed to sniff out subs but only fell into the sea or disappeared into the wild blue yonder—it has failed to put its ingenuity and effort into the needed fleet repairs. The Navy's new material chief, Adm. Isaac C. Kidd, has sworn he will reverse this trend.

Dita's Fumble

Walter Hickel, the Interior Secretary fired by President Nixon for his outspoken ways, recalls in his book about Washington misadventures at a party thrown by ITT's lobbyist Dita Beard.

Hickel had just learned in 1968 that he was going to be Interior Secretary. When an aide, Carl McMurry, went to a Dita Beard party, he was astonished to find it was a celebration of "the pending nomination of Maryland Congressman Rogers C. B. Morton as Secretary of the Interior.

"Dita and her friends were excited about the prospect of having in this post an Easterner familiar with the corridors of Capitol Hill," recalls Hickel. Dita, of course, has been badly misinformed.

Still, it was she who had the last laugh. Two years later Hickel was fired and Roger Morton was installed in his place.

Washington Whirl

WHITE ELEPHANT—Noah Dietrich, long-time aide to billionaire Howard Hughes, claims that Hughes has charged off more than $50 million as business expenses on the huge eight-motored "Spruce Goose" seaplane. The deductions on corporate tax returns can't be justified, says Dietrich, now 83, because the plywood plane which Hughes test flew only once is of no use. Yet Hughes still maintains it and writes off the expense as an annual tax loss.

BETTER BREAK?—The Federal Home Loan Bank Board's plan to give minority-owned savings and loan associations a better break threatens to backfire in favor of the big, rich "S&Ls." The board plans to allow savings and loan associations to open up as many as five mini-offices, one for each main or branch office. But the smaller, minority-run associations often have only one main office. Thus the big associations will grow richer at the expense of the one-office minority operations.

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